

Family Concepts
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Polson, Montana

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Madam Chairman, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee... thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of families around our state receiving and in need of in home services. My name is Aaron Crowder and I work for the Sunburst Community Service Foundation and Family Concepts in Polson, Montana.

I'd like to put into perspective what the families we serve have gone through and are dealing with on a daily basis. It's a fair assumption that there's nothing closer to your heart than your family. You love your children when life has been good... and also when it has not. When we struggle in life... either a product of our own choices or the effects of someone else's, it's often our family that comfort and strengthen us. Now your child has been removed, you are being told that you have put your child in danger, through your actions or those of others. Your right to parent your child is suspended. This impacts your relationships with your family and community. You question your own self worth. Think of your own child right now. Picture your child in a foster or a group home... scared and confused. See the hurt on that child's face... the tears in their eyes... and feel in some small way, the pain that these parents deal with.

I receive referrals from Child and Family Services which often describe this event in a far more factual way. Our agency works with an at-risk family where the children remain in the home but substantial risk exists and provide services to re-unify families when children are in care. One of my current families was referred to Family Concepts. An infant received multiple bone fractures. After a cat and mouse game trying to connect with a parent dodging the inevitable unpleasantness, we began our work. I am educating this parent about proper child handling techniques, appropriate supervision, and child development. The mother then asked if I could help her establish a positive discipline plan. We developed a non-physical discipline plan that began working immediately. After further sessions with the mother we set personal goals for both the children and mother. These goals have led to children returning to school, improved self esteem across the family, safe handling skills, up to date understanding of child development, positive discipline strategies and a mother connected with resources in the community, empowered to be the best mother she can. She is moving into the work force, actively participating in mental health counseling, voluntarily attending chemical dependency counseling, and taking charge of her life and the health and safety of her children. This is the in-home work that the State of Montana directs organizations like Family Concepts to provide in an effort to keep families together. Funding from our State reflects our value in the health and safety of children.

In another case, my goal was to strengthen a hardened relationship between a parent and his children. After 2 or 3 months I saw one of the children smile for the first time when he saw his father. After another month the boy who previously forgot about his visits

with his father was asking if he could stay the night. After another month the children were able to have unsupervised time with their father. In the last visit I supervised with this family, I heard from the back seat of my car- "Are you really going to be done after this... I'm going to miss you... your like a friend to me." And from the father- "You've done a whole lot for me... and my kids... for our relationship. You have taught me a lot. Thanks for putting up with us."

There is a strange sense of awkwardness when families thank me. I simply say- "It's my job... this is what I do." But that's not really the case. This is our duty to the children of Montana. Montana has funded the services that I currently provide and on a daily basis I see the benefit of this work. I see children safer, healthy and thriving in their homes and schools when only months ago they were just surviving.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today and for prioritizing the health and safety of our children... our future and our families.

Sincerely,
Aaron Crowder (Family Support Worker)